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Strategy, Not Bureaucracy: What Really Matters In the Design of the European External Action Service

Almut Möller

At the end of April 2010, Lady Ashton put forward her suggestion for the design of the European External Action Service (EEAS). From the very beginning, her job was to square the circle. The current debate about the design and responsibilities of the new European diplomatic service follows the bureaucratic logic devoid of strategic ambition. At the same time exist the chance and necessity of succeeding in this visionary achievement. The European Union and its member states now have the opportunity to act on their worldwide foreign policy interests in a much more powerful way. The EU member states must therefore start the debate on the EEAS from scratch and quickly unite around the new service. Otherwise they run the risk of sinking further into the backwaters of international policy.

The current wrangling over the design and responsibilities of the European External Action Service (EEAS) should not be surprising. When, in June 2003, the EU Convention presented the suggestion for a European constitutional treaty with a provision for a soon-to-be office of a “European Foreign Minister,” as it was then called, it was already clear that the attendees—among them actors from European governments, parliaments and Brussels institutions—would not reach a consensus on a powerful foreign policy representative of the EU.

It is said that the then-foreign minister of Germany, Joschka Fischer, lost his interest in the job when the so-called “double hat” was decided on: the new European foreign minister would belong to the European Commission, as its Foreign Commissioner and vice president, as well as to the Council of Foreign Ministers. In the latter, the European foreign minister, or the “High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy,” as the office is now called, would take the chair.

The Foreign Ministries Lie in Wait

Imagine serving two institutions who, from their very nature, could hardly be more different. On the one hand, the supranational European Commission in which Lady Ashton’s European “socialization” took place. At the very least she occupied—if only briefly—the office of foreign trade commissioner. In the area of foreign trade policy, the EU Commission has contractually confirmed competencies that make it a strong player in international trade questions. With these competencies, it can gain the respect of even the People’s Republic of China—a lesson that Lady Ashton personally learned. On the other hand, the foreign representative must also chair the Council of Foreign Ministers of the European Union. Here the foreign ministries of the member states attempt to keep her on a short leash. The foreign ministries find themselves somewhere between numb shock and lying in wait. The Lisbon Treaty took away their presence in the European Council—the “conference” of heads of state and government. Under its new President, Herman Van Rompuy, the European Council is becom-

ing the shooting star of the Lisbon Treaty, and in the process has hung the foreign ministries out to dry. They are no longer at the table, while the European Council is becoming an ever-more important organ of government.

These new developments have provoked long faces at the German foreign office. The old struggle between the foreign office and the federal chancellery over control over European policy was elegantly resolved in favor of the Chancellor and her advisors—by the new provisions of the Lisbon Treaty. In the foreign ministries there is next to no willingness to accept losing more power. The larger member states, at least, show reluctance with the political initiatives for the structuring of the EEAS, a third of which will be comprised of national diplomats, but which for their own sake should not become too powerful. Because it would be, on the other hand, unbecoming to torpedo the EEAS, the national foreign services find it advisable not to openly undermine the EEAS, nor to give it any special honors—at least in these early days. So, for the moment, the debate over the EEAS lacks ambition. In the German government, the debate is merely about the appropriate representation of Germany in the new diplomatic service of the European Union. And people are chomping at the question of language: German should also be an official language of the EEAS.

Observers marvel that the member states have in fact successfully prevented any strategic debate on the EEAS. Instead, talk in Brussels and the European capitals is all about placing bureaucratic limitations on the power of Lady Ashton's staff.

A Schuman for Foreign Policy

At the same time, the international situation for Europe could hardly be more dramatic. In Copenhagen last December, China showed the European Union precisely how new power politics à la Beijing function. For months the members of the eurozone have been trying desperately to convey to the world that their currency is robust. What actually has to happen so that the nations of Europe can separate what's being said

from the reality that they will not be able to assert their interests alone, and so that the new foreign posts can play a central role conveying Europe's interests to the world? In the future, the EU embassies could become images of the European Union in miniature, rather than simply representing the politics of the EU Commission as they have done up to now. Here lies the considerable potential for the Union's public diplomacy. During these crisis-shaken days, hardly anyone remembers the visionary Schuman Declaration of May 9, 1950, which recently celebrated its 60th birthday. This declaration laid the foundation for the communitarization of coal and steel production, essential for war-making—and the guarantee for peace between the EU members until today. What the European Union needs now is a similarly visionary debate about the future of its foreign policy.

Be Where Ones Interests Are: The Middle East as Proving Ground

The neighboring Middle East serves as an example. The Union attributes strategic priority to solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was therefore a good decision on the part of the new High Representative to travel to the Middle East on one of her first longer trips abroad, in March 2010. She timed the trip to coincide with one of the more important meetings of the Middle East Quartet in Moscow. Her decision to visit Gaza on the trip sent a political signal. This is a step in the right direction.

The parameters in this region have shifted significantly in recent years: there is a high probability that Iran is building a nuclear bomb, and the two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians is becoming ever less likely, due to Israel's settlement policy and the operations of the radical Hamas in Gaza. Refugees are increasingly seeking to flee to Europe via North Africa, and in a rare merger, six Gulf states formed the Gulf Cooperation Council—with which the European Union has long attempted to sign a free trade agreement, so far unsuccessfully. It was important for Lady Ashton to show a presence in this region—and quickly.

A strategic debate on the Middle East is also necessary, and must be connected with the current structuring of the EEAS: how can the structures of the new EEAS be designed in order to best serve the interests of Europeans in the Middle East? How many employees should work at which posts, with which substantive priorities, which instruments, and what financial means? What role will the special envoys have in relation to all this? Beyond bureaucratic questions of the division of rights, responsibilities, resources, and competencies between the Commission and the Council of the EU in the new EEAS, it must be possible to conduct this essential substantive debate as well.

Show Presence and Determination in Respect To Third-Party States

In Berlin, too little thought is being put into the effects of this bloodless debate on the EEAS on the partner nations of the European Union. It is not in Germany's interest to leave the impression on the United States, for example, that we have worked for almost a decade towards the new provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, that we have promised more coherence and efficiency, above all in foreign policy, and that we now falter when faced with implementation. Europe's governments are damaging themselves with their defensive posturing. But they have so far not been called to account for their actions, since it benefits them to continue the nonexistent debate over the EEAS to the point of bureaucratic boredom and exhaustion. This has led to the state of affairs that, these days, visitors to Washington are not once asked about current developments in the EEAS.

It is now time to have a real debate about the future of European foreign policy and the role of its foreign service: a debate that centers not on bureaucratic, but rather on substantive criteria. First, an inventory and evaluation of the present and previous delegations of the European Commission in third-party states—that

will now be transformed into EU embassies—must take place. At the same time, it must be clarified whether EU diplomats and staff actually serve in appropriate numbers in those places where European interests lie. Second, it must be ensured that the work of the EEAS, which, according to the outline sketched here, should have extensive responsibilities, will be subjected to parliamentary control. Third, non-governmental organizations now have the chance to engage more than ever before with the subject of the EEAS. The formation of the EEAS signifies not only the development of a new institution, but also a decision on the content and focus of the future foreign policy of the Union that should not simply be left to the governments of the EU member states and the institutions in Brussels.

Indeed, the original time frame, to reach a decision on the EEAS before the elections in Great Britain, was frail. But now there is no time to lose. The EEAS must become deployable as quickly as possible so that the High Representative, rather than fighting a tough, multi-front turf war, can fulfill her actual office: to lead the foreign policy of the European Union.

The considerations sketched out here may be criticized as wishful thinking by many. But that does not change their necessity. This chance for European foreign policy to have a fresh institutional start is a rare one.



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